

PLAYING WITH ACCORDION WORDS

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Garnering twelve Academy Award nominations and four Oscars, including Best Picture, *The King's Speech* became, on February 28, the most honored film of the year. Among its many excellencies is the double entendre in its title. The word *Speech* in *The King's Speech* means the speaking of George VI, the stammerer who did not want to become king. At the same time and in the same space, the word *Speech* means the particular address, in 1939, that King George VI delivered to his British subjects exhorting them to join in battle against the Germans.

In other words, *Speech* in the context of this triumphant film is an accordion word.

Like people, words grow after they are born. Once created, words seldom sit still and remain the same forever. Some words expand to take over larger territories: Once *fabulous* meant "resembling or based on a fable." Later came the expanded meaning, "incredible and marvelous." A *holiday* first signified "a holy day," but modern holidays include secular days, such as Valentine's Day and Independence Day. Other words have traveled in the opposite direction. *Meat* began life as "food" and *liquor* as "drink." Once an undertaker could undertake to do anything; nowadays undertakers specifically manage funerals. These words have narrowed considerably.

Some of our most intriguing words, such as *speech*, have retained both their broad and narrow meanings. These words expand and contract like an accordion. We know how big or small they are by their context.

Take the accordion word *time*. *Time* can refer to vast periods, as in "Over time, humans have built civilization." Or *time* can refer to a few hours: "We had a good time at the Quimbys' party." Or *time* can be a specific moment: "What time is it?"

Then there's the word *animal*, which can be used at two levels in a hierarchy of inclusion: First, *animal* can mean anything living that does not grow from the earth, as in "animal, vegetable or mineral." In this context *animal* includes human beings, beasts, birds, fishes, and insects. Second, *animal* can refer to beasts only, in contrast with human beings, as in "man and the animals share dominance of the earth."

The use of *man*, above, yields another accordion word. Although the noun has come under increasing attack as sexist, *man* is still employed to refer both to all of humankind, as in Jacob

Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man*, and to only the male members of our species, as in "man and woman." Similar is the word *gay*, which can designate all homosexuals, as in "gay rights," or only male homosexuals, as in "the gay and lesbian community."

Business started out as a general term meaning literally "busy-ness." After several centuries of life, *business* picked up the narrower meaning of "commercial dealings." In 1925 Calvin Coolidge used the word in both its generalized and specialized senses when he stated, "The chief business of the American people is business." We today can see the word starting to generalize back to its first meaning in phrases like "I don't like this funny business one bit."

I have made up the term "accordion words" to describe these double-duty words. In the examples that follow, I list the broader meaning first and the narrower meaning second:

American: (1) a native or inhabitant of North or South America (2) a citizen of the U.S.

body: (1) the entire person, especially when dead: "They removed the body" (2) the main part of a person, as distinguished from head and limbs: "He took a hard right to the body."

bottom: (1) the lower half of the body: "I feel good from top to bottom" (2) the buttocks: "He has a cute bottom."

breast (and, similarly, *bosom* and *bust*): (1) the human chest: "beat one's breast" (2) either half of the female chest: "a growth on her right breast."

country: (1) a nation: "I am proud of my country." (2) the rural areas of a nation: "town and country."

day: (1) an era: "In my day, we shoveled coal to heat the house." (2) a 24-hour span: "What day do I start work?" (3) the daylight hours of a 24-hour span: "day and night." The second and third meanings work together in Bill Hicks's quip "I sleep eight hours a day. And at least ten at night."

dress (*n.*): (1) apparel, clothing: "Describe the dress of the early puritans." (2) a garment for females: "Jane bought a new dress."

drink (*n.*): (1) any liquid suitable for swallowing: "I'd like a drink of cold water," (2) alcoholic liquid: "You've had too many drinks."

earth: (1) our planet: "dominion over all the earth" (2) soil: "rich earth."

face: (1) the front part of a human head (2) the front part of the human head contorted to be funny or to show disapproval: "He made a face when his mother placed the plate of zucchini in front of him."

gentleman: (1) a male: "Ladies and gentlemen" (2) a refined man.

instrument: (1) something used to achieve an end: "Lord, let me be Thy instrument on this earth." (2) something used to produce music: "Bill Clinton's and Lisa Simpson's instrument is the saxophone."

land: (1) the solid part of the earth's surface, as contrasted to the sea (2) a country: "I've traveled all across this land."

picture: (1) a series of images: "*Casablanca* is my favorite picture." (1) a single image.

politics: (1) the art or science of human interactions: "The politics in this office are brutal." (2) the art or science of human interactions concerned with government: "At an early age she decided to enter politics."

segregate (similarly *discriminate*): (1) to set apart (2) to set apart on the basis of race.

temperature: (1) a degree of heat (2) too high a degree of heat: "You have a temperature."

verse: (1) poetry. (2) a stanza in a poem.

Samuel Goldwyn once observed, "A verbal contract isn't worth the paper it's written on." Obviously the movie mogul used *verbal* to mean "oral," as do most speakers of American English. But *verbal* (Latin *verbum*, "word") communication involves words spoken or written, as in "I'm trying to improve my verbal skills." In this sense, Goldwyn's Goldwynism isn't so funny after all.